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Kremlin Stirs a New Crisis in Cuba

While world outrage is focused on Afghanistan, the troublemakers in the Kremlin are stirring up a new crisis in Cuba.

Intelligence reports warn that the Soviets not only have doubled their combat force in Cuba, but they are lengthening and widening the runways at the Cienfuegos airport. It looks as if the runways are being modified to accommodate the Backfire bomber.

This supersonic Soviet bomber could strike any point in the United States from Cuban bases. By aiming at the nation's underbelly, the Backfire would also encounter little effective air defense.

Soviet fighter pilots, meanwhile, have been operating out of Cuban bases for years. Disturbingly, they don't appear to be in Cuba merely to train Cuban pilots. In a report classified "Secret Spoke," the Defense Intelligence Agency has noted: "There has been very little interplay between the Soviet and Cuban pilots, and the Soviet flight activity appears to be independent of Cuban operations."

Intelligence sources told my associate Sally Denton that 5,000 Soviet combat troops are now based in Cuba — double the number that precipitated an international tempest last September and October. President Carter announced that the presence of a Soviet combat brigade 90 miles from our shores was "unacceptable."

"The thing that concerns us," he declared, "is that it is a combat unit. The Soviets deny it has combat status. But it is a combat unit." He threatened sternly to "take appropriate action."

But the Soviets called his bluff, and Carter backed down. "The brigade

issue is certainly no reason for a retreat to the cold war," he said lamely.

His capitulation apparently helped to cause rather than to prevent a cold war. Intelligence sources claim the Kremlin decision to invade Afghanistan was made in late October after Carter had conceded that the "unacceptable" combat brigade was now acceptable in Cuba.

As the intelligence experts understand what happened inside the Kremlin, the Politburo concluded that if Carter wouldn't challenge them in Cuba, he would not interfere with them in Afghanistan. The resulting events have brought a sudden chill to Soviet-American relations.

Meanwhile, the number of Soviet infantrymen not only has multiplied but military activity has increased alarmingly in Cuba. One ominous report claims that nuclear construction has started near Cienfuegos and that the Soviet troops in Cuba previously had protected nuclear installations in East Germany.

Another secret "Intelligence Appraisal" suggests that Soviet forces may have been sent to Cuba to release Cubans for duty as Soviet surrogates in Africa or "to signal the U.S. that the U.S.S.R. is an in-place Cuban ally should Washington decide to lean on Havana."

But one thing is certain: the Soviets have made a mockery of the Monroe Doctrine.